

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 206 747

CS 206 197

AUTHOR Peterson, Gordon
TITLE Georg Lukacs: His Ideas about Literature and Their Implications for Teaching Children's Literature.
PUB DATE [79]
NOTE 18p.
EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Authors: *Childrens Literature: Critical Reading: *Literary Criticism: *Literature Appreciation: *Theories
IDENTIFIERS *Lukacs (Georg): Revisionism: Structuralism

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the work of Hungarian literary critic and philosopher Georg Lukacs to teachers of children's literature. The first half of the paper explores the key ideas in Lukacs's literary theory, including "speciality"---an aspect of reality that falls between the extremes of individuality and universality; "totality"---the portrayal of historical and social circumstances through characters; the relationship of content and form; the ethical effects of literature; and the social purpose of literature. The second half of the paper compares Lukacs's beliefs with the ideas of two dominant contemporary schools of literary criticism, revisionism and structuralism. Finally, the paper suggests sample questions for teachers to use in analyzing literature with their students. The questions are categorized according to the beliefs of Lukacs, the common beliefs of Lukacs and the revisionists, and the shared beliefs of Lukacs and the structuralists. (AEA)

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY
HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Gordon Peterson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official NIE
position or policy.

Georg Lukács; His Ideas about Literature and
Their Implications for Teaching Children's Literature

Gordon Peterson

Georg (sometimes spelled György) Lukács, a Hungarian literary critic and philosopher, is generally regarded as one of the dominant figures of literary criticism during the past decade. There are several books and many periodical articles about his ideas, but his ideas have not received attention among those concerned with teaching children's literature. Therefore, it is the purpose of this article to introduce his most important literary concepts, to very briefly compare his beliefs with those of other important literary critics whose ideas are in varying degrees representative of the most recent dominant literary schools, and to present some educational implications in the form of questions that teachers can ask students.

Not only is Lukács one of the most important contemporary literary critics, but his writings, far more than those of most critics, raise the basic literature issues: the relation between literature and reality, the relation of the general and the specific, the relation of form and content, and the relation of literature to life. An introduction to Lukács is an introduction, then, to literature, however such an introduction is obviously limited because it deals only with the responses of one person.

IMPORTANT LITERARY IDEAS

Key ideas in the literary theory of Lukács are speciality,

totality, form and content, the effects of literature, and the social purposes of literature.

The Category of Speciality

To Lukács, category is not merely a subjective product of thinking, but it is a real, objective aspect of reality. Most previous literary critics, such as Aristotle (to whom Lukács admits considerable indebtedness), have thought in terms of only two categories: the individual and the universal. Individuality refers to the "this" phenomena and is without any degree of generalization, whereas universality refers to the "all" and is the ultimate of generalization. Lukács suggests there should also be a third category: the category of speciality, a category which falls somewhere between the extreme categories of individuality and universality. If reality, as in Marxism, is conceived of dialectically, then its reflection in human thinking must be in the form of striving from the individual to the universal and from the universal to the individual, back to the universal, and so on.

(Generalizations can be derived only from the individuals, which, in turn are better understood with the help of generalizations, and the newly illuminated individuals can lead to more accurate generalizations.

The process is endless.) Along the length road between the two, there are an infinite number of points of relative generalizations which constitute the category of speciality. The three categories have a function in all modes of reflection, but with significant differences. In science, for example, where the striving is for the most accurate generalizations (laws), the category of speciality is merely a mediator,

of temporary use. Each new scientific generalization is built upon previous ones, with the new superseding the old. In literature, however, the goal is not the discovery of the most accurate universals, nor a preoccupation with the isolated individual, although it does not ignore either one. The territory where literary works take their final form is somewhere between the two, in the category of speciality. The category of speciality is the area where, in a dialectical system, the universal, on the one hand, and the individual, on the other, both occur; it contains both, but it is neither. The category of speciality broadens, extends, enriches, and gives meaning to both the specific and the universal.

Totality

In explaining totality Lukacs makes a distinction between extensive and intensive totalities. Extensive totality includes all elements of objective reality, whether or not they are of any significant concern to humans, and only science is capable of portraying extensive totality. Intensive totality, on the other hand, is the depth of a human's interaction in the full context with the relevant elements of the social-historical environment. Lukács believes literature's concern should be with intensive reality and intensive reality should be presented through characters who do not lose their individuality and who also contain in themselves the richness and depth of all the relevant fundamental processes of their circumstances. A writer should not attempt to portray a detailed picture of historical and social

circumstances, but, instead, portray the period through characters; great historical issues are translated into human terms and imbued with dramatic life.

The concepts of totality and the category of speciality form an inseparable unity in Lukács' theory. Reality, as we know it in everyday life, is by no means falsified through the literary selection's independent world; rather, it is heightened. This dissolution of the essential with the specific, creating the category of speciality, brings a sharper more complete picture of reality than otherwise would be perceived. Such a complete literary picture is richer, deeper, and more meaningful than the universal or the specific, even if the latter are historically authentic.

Form and Content

Lukács seems to have inconsistent or indecisive views on the relationship of content and form. From the emphasis in his practical criticism on content, he seems to deemphasize the importance of form; whereas in his theoretical works he seems to emphasize form over content. But when all Lukács' works are taken together, a very clear picture emerges indicating that Lukacs sees the relationship of form and content in a dialectical one, the two completing one another. In this sense they are of equal importance and a literary work is made up of both content and form, although ultimately the form is more important.

In his most concise definition of this dialectical relationship, Lukács states that content is none other than the "overflow" of form into content, while form is none other than the "overflow" of content

into form. Form alone cannot lend something literary value, but content does not constitute literature if it is communicated to the reader directly without the mediation of literary form. The content appearing independently of literary form may be of significance as politics or history, but before there can be a work of literature it is necessary to have literary form.

The Effects of Literature

Lukács considers the ultimate effect of literature to be ethical in nature. By this he does not mean that literature seeks to interfere with a person's practical life by giving sermons, moral codes, or object lessons, but he is talking about a long, subtle, uneven process (emotional and rational) that occurs in the reader after the literary effect proper. The effect of literature is a socio-historical effect of awakening a person's consciousness to the fact the person "makes himself" and to the broadening of the concept of the individual human as a member of ongoing humanity.

The total literary experience that results in this ultimately ethical effect consists of three parts: 1) the reader's inner state before the effect, 2) the literary effect itself (catharsis), and 3) the after-effect.

The reader's state before the literary experience is extremely important because the reader never faces a work as *tabula rasa*; rather the reader has impressions, experiences, and ideas, all of which play an important role both in the catharsis and the after-effect.

The core of the literary effect itself is catharsis. This emotional

effect has a broadly humanizing influence upon the reader: to develop a readiness for the morally good. Catharsis evokes that moving experience which reveals how different, how new--at once more individual and more universal--reality can be. The literary effect changes the whole being of everyday life into one with a sense of human wholeness by forcing onto the reader a new world, by filling the reader with new or freshly seen contents, and by making the reader capable of taking in this world with rejuvenated senses and thinking.

The consideration of the collision of the new with the old is important in Lukács' theory. During the literary experience there is frequently a battle in the reader between old experiences and the present literary experience. The effect of great literature is precisely its capacity to make the new victorious over the old. The deeply moving, even shaking, emotional literary experience is necessary because only the most extreme trials can change the reader's true being.

The transformation from the everyday to a sense of wholeness as a member of ongoing humanity resulting from the literary (cathartic) effect is temporary. After the experience the reader goes back to personal goals, problems, and desires, and any change is only a possibility and by no means a certainty. What influence the literary work has upon the reader is difficult to measure, because the effect varies from individual to individual and is like to be cumulative; the effect of a specific literary experience is imperceptible and only a whole series of similar experiences will reveal visible changes, although it is possible for a single literary experience to bring about a complete turnabout in a person's life.

The literary effect does not itself solve any of the reader's problems, complex or simple, personal or social, but it does develop a readiness. To translate this readiness into practical actions, the reader must find the necessary tools in life itself. The real power of literature is that it enlarges the reader's picture about self and the world.

The fact that Lukács finds the ultimate effect of literature to be ethical, that he accepts the thesis that truth and beauty to be identical, does not mean that he wishes to impose external ethical standards on literature. He rejects the ethical methods of Plato and all other extrinsic criticism, agreeingⁱⁿ instead with Aristotle's intrinsic approach.

The Social Purpose of Literature

Lukács uses a metaphor to describe the relationship between life and literature: literature is compared to a very unique "tributary" of the "great river of life," a "tributary" that branches off from the "river" and feeds back into it only to repeat the entire process again and again, endlessly. This is a carefully selected and constructed metaphor, consistent with Lukacs' materialistic philosophy, for the "tributary" of literature does not originate from mystical realms but rather from objective reality and reflects this reality in accordance to the characteristics peculiar to literature. It is also consistent with Lukacs' belief in literature's positive role in improving life by contributing to the aesthetic-ethical growth of the "total" person.

The "tributary" of literature does not bring new "waters" from unknown sources to enlarge the "river"; it returns the old "waters" in a purified, qualitatively improved form. The success of the literary effect depends entirely upon the successful application of the literary principles of category of speciality, totality, and form/content. The "tributary" does not flow back into life in general, but directly into the veins of individual readers during the catharsis, thus storing, accumulating, the potential means for the improvement of society. Since literature does not address itself to specific, practical problems and issues, it promotes the solution of those only indirectly, through the contribution of the ethically-aesthetically improved person.

Consistent with this view of the role of literature in society, Lukács rejects the Stalinist "engineers of the soul" theory, which would make useful tools of literature to accomplish timely social tasks. With equal emphasis, he also rejects the other extreme position that literature is for itself, that it has nothing to do with what is happening in society, that it is independent of society, history, ethics, and thought. Literature should make it possible for a person to gain a broader and deeper consciousness of personal development, putting the perspective of the person into a clearer focus so that the person knows where the person came from and where the person is going, and creating in the person a moral readiness to participate positively in society and life.

LUKACS COMPARED WITH OTHER CONTEMPORARY CRITICS

In order to give a better perspective on the basic beliefs of Lukacs, the basic beliefs of representative contemporary critics reflecting the ideas of the two dominant contemporary literary schools (Revisionism and Structuralism) will be very briefly presented and compared with those of Lukacs.

Revisionists

The dominant literary theory (dominant meaning the theory endorsed most often and/or judged most influential by those who write articles and books) of the late 1970s could be called Revisionism (or Deconstructionism or Poststructuralism) and is revealed in the writings of such contemporary literary critics as Harold Bloom, Gerald Graff, and Paul de Man.

Whereas Lukács states there is objective reality and he stresses the possibility of knowledge, a representative Revisionist stresses subjectivity and denies a reader can understand a literary work. Lukács is somewhat like a Revisionist in that both believe form is more important than content and both believe personal reader characteristics play an important role in literary understandings, but a Revisionist places considerably more emphasis on these ideas.

Key specific ideas of Harold Bloom are his explanations of "creative misreading" and his belief that a text does not have external existence. Bloom suggests it is necessary for a reader to personally reexamine literary works and the interpretations of others and to make the necessary

"corrections." Lukács would generally accept this, but would not emphasize it to the extent Bloom does. Further, Bloom states there are not texts, there are no relationships between a text and external reality, and there are no "subjects" of texts, all that exists for Bloom are relationships between the reader and a text. Lukács would deny this extreme subjectivity and instead he believes in objectivity.

Two basic beliefs of Gerald Graff, which are not shared by Lukács, are literature does not reflect ultimate truth and a denial of the certainty of knowledge. However, Lukács would accept Graff's criticism of teachers using literature to accomplish didactic purposes (teaching knowledge and specific behavior).

The theme underlying Paul de Man's literary theory is "sign and meaning can never coincide." De Man argues it is impossible for literary language (and any language) to escape from confusion and untruth, it is a fallacy to believe in a finite and single interpretation, interpretation is a task without end and without progress, and literature is rhetoric and not truth. Lukács does not accept this.

The chief limitation of Revisionist beliefs, apart from the philosophical acceptance or rejection of them, is they place too much emphasis on denying objectivity and do not place enough emphasis on general or specific suggestions about how to understand a literary work.

Structuralists

Structuralism was the dominant literary theory during the 1960s and had a considerable following in the 1970s, however, interest has

presumably peaked and is in decline. Influential representatives of this school include Roland Barthes, Jan Mukarovsky, Stein Olsen, V. I. Propp, and Viktor Shklovskii. Generally speaking, a Structuralist emphasizes the total structure (how the individual parts relate to and form the whole), believes a literary work can be transformed into many different interpretative statements, and believes there should be as much scientific and objective analysis as possible. Like a Revisionist, a Structuralist stresses individual interpretations (although a Structuralist believes this is from the perspective of a field of study, such as linguistics or psychoanalysis, rather than from an individual perspective like a Revisionist). The chief difference is that a Structuralist emphasizes the basic underlying structure of a literary work whereas a Revisionist questions the objectivity of meaning. From the educational perspective, there are many more general and specific teaching implications from a Structuralist than from a Revisionist.

The most important general beliefs of Roland Barthes, the French critic who is the most influential Structuralist, are the ultimate being of literature resides not in the content but in its structure and the value of literature is determined not in the relationship to external meaning but by the successful internal development of form. Lukács also emphasizes structure and form, but compared with Barthes Lukacs emphasizes more the content.

Probably the most important specific contributions of Barthes are his ideas about codes and his distinction between validity and truth. Barthes suggests four codes that are part of literary understanding:

1) understanding specifics, 2) considering the means by which the author raises problems, creates suspense, and provides a resolution, 3) perceiving the implied meanings of figures of speech, and 4) stating the theme. All these are also important to Lukács.

Regarding validity and truth, Barthes believes the goal of literary interpretation is not to discover "external truths" but only to find the extent to which a work is "internally valid." Lukács would place more emphasis on truth, but, like Barthes, internal verbal analysis is the chief concern of literary interpretation.

The chief contribution of Jan Mukarovsky, the most distinguished of the Czech Structuralists, is his explanation of foregrounding: any item that attracts attention to itself for what it is, rather than merely acting as a vehicle for information. Lukács would share the emphasis on form, but he would add some concern for content also.

Olsen makes one of the most helpful contributions by suggesting criteria by which an interpretation can be judged and criteria with which to evaluate a selection. The chief ways to judge the validity of an interpretation is by the extent to which the reader gives all the important segments and shows the aesthetic function of each segment. The literary work itself is valued if the author gives cause-effect relationships and if all the elements are integrated into a unity. Lukács would accept these, but, again, he also is concerned with content.

V. I. Propp's most important contribution is suggestion that for traditional literature there may be many characters, but there are a limited number of character functions (such as hero, villain, helper, and

sought-for-person) and specific folk tales should be discussed by identifying the functions of each character. Again, Lukács would want to add meaning to function.

Defamiliarization is perhaps Viktor Shklovskii's most important contribution. The essential function of literature is to counteract the process of habituation encouraged by routine everyday modes of perception where we cease to "see" and become anaesthetized to distinctive features. The aim of literature is to defamiliarize that with which we are overly familiar, to "creatively denorm" the usual, and so to inculcate a new, childlike, non-jaded perspective. The writer thus aims to disrupt "stock responses" and to generate a heightened awareness of our ordinary perception of "reality," so that we end up seeing the world instead of numbly recognizing it. Basically, Lukacs also believes this.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

From the preceeding several appropriate questions seem apparent. . First will be presented illustrative questions based on the beliefs of Lukacs, next illustrative questions based on the common beliefs of Lukacs and Revisionists, and finally illustrative questions based on the shared beliefs of Lukacs and Structuralists.

Questions Based on the Beliefs of Lukacs

1. To what extent does the main character seem both like a real individual person and also like a universal human? Explain and justify?
2. To what extent does the author show the influence of other persons, events, and situations on the main character as opposed to showing

the main character in isolation?

3. To what extent is information about the basic situation or problem revealed through characterization and plot as opposed to being directly told?

4. To what extent does the theme emerge from plot, characterization, and setting as opposed to being directly stated?

5. To what extent does the literary selection make the reader more aware of a universal situation as opposed to emphasis on a problem in a country or with a group of people?

6. To what extent does the selection make readers aware of a basic problem as opposed to giving a solution?

7. To what extent can the literary work be used as background for a study on a social studies problem?

Questions Based on the Common Beliefs of Lukacs and Revisionists

1. To what extent is your response different from the responses of classmates?

(Because Lukacs has little in common with the beliefs of Revisionists, there can be few questions from both.)

Questions Based on the Beliefs of Lukacs and Structuralists

1. To what extent do the parts form a whole as opposed to being separate?

2. Explain and evaluate the author's effectiveness to raise problems, to create suspense, and to provide a resolution?

3. Explain the following figures of speech, images, and symbols: ____.

4. To what extent do the characters and plot seem believable based

on what the author wrote?

5. To what extent does the author's style draw attention to itself (provides aesthetic satisfactions) as opposed to merely serving as a means to give information?

6. To what extent are cause-effect and motivation shown to have importance as opposed to merely having things occur or relying on coincidence or contrivance?

7. Which character serves as hero, villain, helper, and sought-for-person?

8. To what extent did the author make something familiar seem new?

Bibliography

Books by Georg Lukács

- CONVERSATIONS WITH LUKÁCS. Tr. by Theo Pinkus. MIT Press, 1975.
GOETHE AND HIS AGE. Tr. by Robert Anchor. Grosset & Dunlap, 1969.
THE HISTORICAL NOVEL. Tr. by Hannah Mitchell. Humanities Press, 1965.
HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS. Tr. by Rodney Livingstone. Merlin Press, 1971.
REALISM IN OUR TIME. Tr. by John Mander. Harper & Row, 1962.
SOLZHENITSYN. Tr. by William Graf. MIT Press, 1971.
SOUL AND FORM. Tr. by Anna Bostock. MIT Press, 1974.
STUDIES IN EUROPEAN REALISM. Tr. by Edith Bone. Grosset & Dunlap, 1964.
THE THEORY OF THE NOVEL. Tr. by Anna Bostock. MIT Press, 1971.
WRITER AND CRITIC. Tr. by Arthur Kahn. Grosset & Dunlap, 1971.
THE YOUNG HEGEL. Tr. by Rodney Livingstone. MIT Press, 1976.

Recent Books Wholly or Partly about Georg Lukács

- Arato, Andrew. THE YOUNG LUKÁCS AND THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN MARXISM. Seabury Press, 1979.
Arvon, Henri. MARXIST ESTHETICS. Tr. by Helen Lane. Cornell University Press, 1973.
Bahr, Ehrhard and Kunzer, Ruth. GEORG LUKÁCS. Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1972.
Dunlop, John (ed.). ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN. Collier Books, 1975.
Eagleton, Terry. MARXISM AND LITERARY CRITICISM. University of California Press, 1976.
Jameson, Frederic. MARXISM AND FORM. Princeton University Press, 1971.
Kovaly, Pavel (ed.). REHUMANIZATION OR DEHUMANIZATION? Branden Press, 1974.
Man, Paul de. BLINDNESS AND INSIGHT. Oxford University Press, 1971.
McInnes, Neil. THE WESTERN MARXISTS. Library Press, 1972.
Meszaros, Istvan. ASPECTS OF HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS. Routledge and Kegan, 1972.
Parkinson, George. GEORG LUKÁCS. Routledge and Kegan, 1977.
Spilka, Mard (ed.). TOWARDS A POETICS OF FICTION. Indiana University Press, 1977.
Steiner, George. LANGUAGE AND SILENCE. Atheneum, 1970.
Watkins, Evans (ed.). THE CRITICAL ACT. Yale University Press, 1978.

Representative Books by Revisionists and Structuralists

- Barthes, Roland. THE EIFFEL TOWER, AND OTHER MYTHOLOGIES. Hill and Wang, 1979.
Bloom, Harold. A MAP OF MISREADING. Oxford University Press, 1975.
Graff, Gerald. LITERATURE AGAINST ITSELF: LITERARY IDEAS IN MODERN SOCIETY. University of Chicago Press, 1979.
Man, Paul de. ALLEGORIES OF READING; FIGURAL LANGUAGE IN ROUSSEAU, NIETZSCHE, RILKE, AND PROUST. Yale University Press, 1979.

biblio

- Olsen, Stein. THE STRUCTURE OF LITERARY UNDERSTANDING. Cambridge University Press, 1978.
- Propp, V. I. MORPHOLOGY OF THE FOLKTALE. University of Texas Press, 1968.
- Shklovskii, Viktor. "Parrels in Tolstoy." In Erlich, V., ed., TWENTIETH CENTURY RUSSIAN LITERARY CRITICISM, pp. 63-80. Yale University Press, 1975.